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# THE AUK:

## A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF

### ORNITHOLOGY.

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VOL. XII.

JANUARY, 1895.

NO. I.

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#### A WINTER ROBIN ROOST IN MISSOURI, AND OTHER ORNITHOLOGICAL NOTES.

BY O. WIDMANN.

I. OCTOBER, 1893.

MR. WILLIAM BREWSTER and Mr. Bradford Torrey made us acquainted with the Robin's summer roost. They tell us that the roosting flights diminish rapidly after the middle of September and that by the end of the first week in October the roosts are practically deserted.

This corresponds to what is going on at the winter roost. As the Robin deserts the former, it appears at the latter, and at the particular roost of which I will speak now, the maximum of frequency is reached by the middle of October, when the roosting birds must be numbered by thousands and, perhaps, tens of thousands.

This roost is situated sixty miles northwest of St. Louis in the northeast corner of Lincoln County, Missouri. It is a wide, open marsh, between King's Lake on the west and the Mississippi River on the east, near to the former, but about two miles from the latter. The ground is highest along King's Lake and lowest

half a mile east of it, where the rain and overflow leave a deep and long slough. The marsh dries up slowly during the summer and in dry seasons the slough may even become nearly or entirely dry in fall.

The higher levels of the marsh are cultivated and, when visiting the ground in October, we may find parts of it sown to wheat while on others corn has been shocked and some of the marsh grass has been made into hay and put up in large stacks.

King's Lake is fringed by a nice growth of trees among which we recognize pinoaks, elms, soft maples, pecans, persimmons, honey locusts, willows and in the fore ground several fine specimens of red haw, covered with scarlet fruit, which together with the adjoining farm buildings make a most picturesque landscape.

The lower parts of the marsh, with the exception of the slough itself, are overgrown with reeds<sup>1</sup> five feet high, bending over in all directions. These reeds are matted into a regular thicket which is not easily penetrated. In the fall the reeds are dry and yellow, some cinnamon and even dark chestnut brown.

It is in these reeds that the Robin finds a safe retreat for the night, sheltered equally well from wind and cold, rain and snow, and comparatively safe from prowling enemies. During the day nothing betrays the roost. Not a Robin is seen in the neighborhood all forenoon and for several hours of the afternoon. An hour or two before sunset a few may arrive and stay in the trees along King's Lake, but nobody would suspect anything extraordinary until half an hour before sunset when the great influx begins.

The new arrivals no more fly to the trees but alight on the ground, some in the wheat field, some in the meadows, some on the corn and hay stacks, but the majority flies directly into the reeds, while the others shift from place to place until they, too, disappear. They do not come in troops like Blackbirds, but the whole air seems for a while to be filled with them, and standing in the marsh, one can easily see that they come from all points of the compass, all aiming toward a certain tract of reeds, a piece

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<sup>1</sup> Known in botanical works as fresh-water card-grass (*Spartina cynosuroides* Willd.).

of about forty acres on some of the lowest ground where the last remains of water are now vanishing, leaving heaps of dead and dying fishes in the puddles (mostly dog, cat, and buffalo fishes).

When unmolested the Robins are not long in settling down and out of sight amongst the high and thickly matted reeds, and it is not nearly dark when the last has disappeared and nothing indicates the presence of so many thousand Robins but an occasional clatter, soon to give way to entire silence. If one enters their domain at night, they start with a scold, one by one, and not until one approaches very closely, to drop down again at no great distance.

Associating with them in the roost sleep a goodly number of Rusty Blackbirds, while the Bronzed Grackles keep somewhat apart. They arrive in troops with the last Robins and leave also a little later in the morning.

The Robin leaves its roost with the break of day, in about the same mysterious way in which it came. For a few minutes the whole air is alive with Robins, not in troops or heading in certain directions, but every one seems to follow another route, some moving at moderate heights through the misty air, but the greater number rise rapidly, though with laborious wing, heavy with dew, in order to gain the drier and purer atmosphere above, where they disappear as mere specks in the first rays of the just now rising sun.

Where are they going? The sun is hardly high enough in the sky to throw its soft light on the dew-drops in the marsh when not a single Robin is either heard or seen. Several clouds of Grackles have swept over the marsh with heavy, whistling wing and have disappeared in the distance; the marsh now seems deserted. Silence reigns. The sun's rays are beginning to soften the chilliness of the October air. The Leconte's Sparrow creeps stealthily up to an elevated position to dry its wet dress in the sunshine. Swamp and Song Sparrows leave the reeds to visit the tussocks in the oozy slough. The two Marsh Wrens come out of their retreat for moments to air their tiny wings. Snipes and Pectoral Sandpipers are at work on the softer parts of the slough. Rails sneak from under the decaying leaves of water-plants and the Marsh Hawk has occupied its favorite perch in

the swamp. A few Rusties may still linger in the neighborhood but no Robin is heard or seen. Where did they all go?

It takes considerable quantities of food to satisfy so many thousands of birds and we should therefore not wonder to find them fifty and more miles away from the roost, visiting certain known feeding grounds or wandering in search of new ones and still return in the evening to the same roost, day by day, for weeks, and some of them even for months.

With the advent of severe winter weather, generally about the middle or last part of November, the great majority leave this northern roost, presumably for another roost in more southern climes,<sup>1</sup> but enough remain in ordinary seasons, such as 1893-94, throughout the winter, to send detachments on foraging expeditions to regions as far away as St. Louis County. Suppose a frosty morning in midwinter, with the sun just rising in its cold splendor, finds us standing in the wooded bottomland on the right bank of the Missouri River, near Crève Cœur Lake, thirty-five miles southeast of the roost. Flickers have just left their sleeping apartments in the high old timber and are gathering on tree-tops to enjoy the first rays of the rising orb. Troops of Red-winged Blackbirds and smaller parties of Cowbirds have passed by, coming from a neighboring roost. The first Crows are appearing on the scene, tired by the uninterrupted flight from the distant roost. It is now ten minutes since the sun is in the sky, when all at a sudden the startling notes of the Robin are heard overhead and a dozen or so alight in the tree-tops to rest a minute or two. While we are yet watching them, a few more are seen coming from the same direction in the northwest and after making things lively for a few moments, calling and chattering, all are gone, proceeding on their tour through St. Louis County. We may meet them again, some time during the day, somewhere along the border of a shallow water or in the recesses of a dilapidated forest, feeding among the debris in company with several kinds of Sparrows, Bluebirds and similar braves who risk their lives to prove the mildness of a Missouri winter.

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<sup>1</sup> Since writing the above I have visited, in the last week of October, a very large roost in the flags of Indian Slough, a branch of the St. Francis River, southern Missouri, not far from the Arkansas state line.

Later in the winter, the habits of the Robin change. Those who left this roost return no more in spring. With the very first awakening of spring the old Robin's love for home surroundings no longer allows of his wandering forth and back through the land like an aimless tramp; he no longer finds pleasure or seeks safety in hiding in the swamps like a thief. His only desire is to hurry to his old breeding grounds as fast as vanishing snow and melting ice permit. He braves all dangers and the rigors of late winter weather like a man, content with the all-inspiring company of his devoted spouse.

## II. APRIL 12, 1894.

What a transformation has been going on at the site of the Robin's roost! Everything looks changed! The corn-shocks have been removed, the field ploughed and the marsh-grasses, even the flags, have been burnt to the ground. For miles around the level ground looks black and bare. No Robin and no Black-bird could be expected to roost on this charred waste; and it is questionable if any birds at all visit such an uninviting solitude. But let us try; let us go over the entire tract and see if it is really forsaken.

What at first seemed a universally and equally charred plain proves by closer inspection to be a checker-board of tracts, some lately burnt, some, not yet touched by fire, have only been trampled down by grazing animals, and in the region of the slough we find small islands of high and tangled grass, which have been saved from destruction by a belt of moist ground intervening. The winter and early spring have been exceptionally dry; the water in the slough or lake, as it is called where free from plant growth, is very low, nowhere more than six inches deep. There are large mud-flats from which the water is just receding. Adjoining these are zones of mire covered with the remains of withered spatter dock, and these in turn are surrounded by a girdle of partly burnt flags.

But we have not been on the ground long before we detect our error. The marsh is not the dreary void for which we took it. We have hardly reached the old cornfield, lately turned over

to be worked into a new cornfield — if only the Mississippi will be merciful enough to spare it from an untimely flood — when we notice that on and between the large clods everything seems alive with little birds. And how busy they are! Those nearest to us run in stooping attitude as fast as they can long distances down the furrows; the others walk by fits and starts with watchful eye, darting right and left, to pick up the bread and meat which the plow so kindly exposed. Now and then one will fly up into the air, ten or more feet, and with a dexterous turn will overtake a fleeing insect. This is a flock of Titlarks or Pipits, *Anthus pensilvanicus*; perhaps a hundred of the sprightly birds, and as long as they stay with us the marsh will not be the desolate wilderness for which at first we took it. They have a way of enlivening a region in the most interesting manner. They are not always on the ploughed field, and when they leave it and take to wing as if to say good-bye forever, they will shortly be back again and try another piece of ground, the very one which has been charred so recently that the cinders still preserve the shape of the plant of which they formed the frame.

And even if not seen their endearing voice is so often in the air, that we are always cognizant of their presence. Small parties follow us to the mud-flats in the lake and even walk deliberately into the water, up to the belly, to obtain a toothsome morsel from below its surface.

Though belonging to the Wagtail family, the wagging of the tail does not play such a conspicuous rôle as one might suppose. Indeed, it is only performed when its owner is in a sort of excitement, especially when in a state of undecision, where the fluctuations of its mind are expressed in, or at least correspond with, the vacillations of its tail.

The white tail-feathers do not form such a distinguishing feature as they do in Junco, for instance. The white is but little visible when the bird takes wing, but it shows very plainly on alighting, when the fully spread tail-feathers check the force of the descent. The dress they wear this time of the year varies greatly in intensity and in color with the individual. The cinnamon-buff of the lower part is mostly of a yellow cast, but not seldom a decidedly reddish hue. The amount of dark spots

is also greatly differing and some have even a pronounced maxillary line, enclosing a white chin and running down to a black patch in the middle of the breast. Some appear to be really blue above, others decidedly greenish. Their note is a short *tsit-tsilil* and the flight at first a fitful jumping from one side to the other, then undulatory like a Goldfinch's, changing at last to a more protracted rise and fall not unlike a Horned Lark's.

But *Anthus* is not the only inhabitant of the lonely marsh. Sometimes when a flock goes up we hear besides the well-known *tsit-tsilil* another note of abrupt sharpness, which can hardly belong to the gentle Pipit. It must come from a wilder bird, who only frequents the same feeding ground and goes up when they go. It is no less a personage than Smith's Longspur, *Calcarius pictus*, and if we go carefully over the ground we shall soon make its acquaintance. It needs care, because, when alone by themselves, they do not go up as readily as *Anthus*. We may walk right among them and they will not fly up; they only run with lowered head a few yards away from us and squat until we have passed. They use any depression to hide in, and on the low grounds they have not to run far, since nearly every square yard has its crawfish hill.

Upon the slightest indication of their presence we stop and look about us, scrutinizing every foot of ground. Before long, we may see one, two, three or more around us, some with conspicuous white shoulders, light gray and dark, black-striped head and yellowish napes; others without the white on the shoulders, comparatively plain birds, females. There is an obvious similarity of the under parts with that of the Titlark.

They give us plenty of time to look at every one, but as soon as one goes up with its sharp alarm-note, immediately birds are seen to rise from twenty different points around us, go straight and in spirals up above us, all showing in a striking manner the white patches on the under wing-coverts and the white outer tail-feathers; emitting their wild *click*, they hover right above our heads, go higher and higher until they gain an altitude, where even the best field-glass can reach them no more. Though they go high, they do not go far and after a little manœuvring may come down again and settle within half a mile of the spot from where they rose.



But while we are busy watching them, a troop of thirty Golden Plovers sweeps by, low over the marsh, and seeing us, they draw a few wide circles around us in a style which in beauty and precision of execution cannot be surpassed.

When satisfied that all is safe, they alight, all at once, as if moved by a single thought, all at the very same moment, and keep standing close together, all in one bunch, all pointing the head one way, all motionless for several seconds, all eyes fixed upon the suspicious looking intruder. They are most beautiful creatures; the symmetrically shaped body with head, neck, wings, tail and legs, all in the most pleasing harmony of proportions; the large, intelligent, dark eye, set off to best advantage by a pure white curve, half encircling it and running down along the side of the neck; the back reflecting golden light, while the white underparts begin to show dark cloudings, in some few even a black area.

Now they begin to feed, running swiftly over the newly burnt ground, gathering food at every run, when suddenly they spy a large body of others of their kind, coming nearer and nearer, in a long-stretched line, filling the air with a medley of melodious whistles in many different keys — and up they go like a flash to join their passing brothers. The whole troop, perhaps 500 in all, manœuvres now in common and like a regiment of the best drilled soldiers, they perform the most astonishing evolutions in turns and sweeps, now high, now low, now all a flash of brightest gold, then all a streak of silvery white, almost vanishing from view in the distant sky, to return with lightning rapidity so low as to almost touch the ground with the tip of their long, swift pinions.

The marsh is after all not the deserted waste for which it might be taken, and though the April moon rises upon it without throwing the shadow of high and floating grasses upon slumbering Robins and Blackbirds, as it did in fall, its soft light is reflected from many a golden back of north-bound wanderers who need no shelter during night but nestle down upon a lawn-like ground, and, judging from the countless number of white spots that mark their stay, return to their favorite roost for several nights.

And we have not yet visited the slough or lake, as it is called. It is just full of life and the birds there have to-day a holiday.

They seem to feel at home and when disturbed are loath to leave. This out-of-the-way slough is at times a true asylum for the poor hunted game-birds. A few St. Louis business men have acquired the sole right to hunt with the intention to spend the Sundays here a-hunting; but the county officials found it good to enforce the law which forbids shooting on Sundays. The consequence is that the birds have a good time generally and on some days it looks as if it were a veritable paradise for Ducks and Snipes, when they feed unmolested from morn till night.

If we slowly and carefully approach, there will be a little stir among them, but soon all will resume their vocation, especially when the day is cool and birds are hungry. In such weather the Snipes do not lie still but feed all day. See, one walks in the water just in front of us, knee-deep, unmindful of our presence, continually thrusting the long bill into the mud below, immersing the face to the edge of the eye.

A party of Mallards, an equal number of males and females, is swimming in the water, only a hundred yards away. They try to hide behind the spatter dock, the females at least, but the beautiful greenheads will never for a moment turn their watchful eye from us, and if we should make the least suspicious demonstration, all would be up at once.

Six Pectoral Sandpipers, *Tringa maculata*, come with a song, and, after alighting near the edge of the water, make immediately into it and begin to feed, picking at every step.

The slough forms here a small lake, a few inches deep, in fact just deep enough to allow two Yellow-legs, *Totanus flavipes*, to wade all over its midst, while the Pectoral Sandpipers with their shorter legs must remain along its edge. Thus they feed together for hours, if undisturbed, and we have ample opportunity to compare their appearance and behavior. At first sight, their dress seems pretty much alike, but the back of Totanus is finer and darker mottled, and viewed from the side the black wing-tips form a conspicuous patch, completely hiding the white upper tail-coverts, while in *Tringa* the corresponding region shows a white area, formed by the upper and lower tail-coverts. The superciliary in both birds is only obvious when the birds are seen from in front; the face of *Tringa* is more Snipe-like, the bill of Totanus is

darker, longer, straighter. There is no jerking with the head in *Tringa* as in *Totanus*. The former goes up with a Swallow-like note, the latter with a loud whistle, which it sometimes utters while in the water, and not seldom does it stretch its leg or raise its wings straight overhead, to show the pretty lining of that powerful wing which makes him such a wonderfully swift flyer.

As the Yellow-legs go up and fly away from us, the white tail is a striking object and when on wing the long and slender body, with legs sticking way out behind, is a peculiar sight. The white outer tail-feather of *Tringa* is just visible as a white margin and when the bird is speeding through the air it has some resemblance to a Swallow.

The Pectorals, though there are always a few together, seem disposed to be quarrelsome at this season, and frequent bickerings occur, in which they jump up against each other and utter something like bad language.

Following the border of the slough we come upon many solitary Snipes; they go up but do not leave the slough, which is about a mile in length, and has the shape of an S. In the peninsulas formed by the curves of the S the grass and weeds have escaped the fire entirely and remain in their original wilderness. Here is where the Savanna and Swamp Sparrows find a retreat to their liking, and the old Red-winged Blackbird is occupying a perch on one of the few small bushes, in which his last year's nest is still hanging. He declares with wonderful perseverance over and over again that he is the owner of the patch.

A pair of Shovellers, *Spatula clypeata*, fly low over the slough, and, as our eyes follow admiringly the showy birds, we detect a bunch of Blue-winged Teals, which upon nearer approach go up in pairs with a soft, peculiar whistle. Troops of Pipits and Golden Plovers come towards evening to bathe and drink and leave again. On a part of the marsh set aside for pasturage and with the old grass pretty thick in places, a number of small birds spring up and fly a few rods, low over the ground, and drop out of sight. Using a little strategy we succeed in driving one to the border of the slough, where he perches in full view and allows an easy identification: a Leconte Sparrow in high plumage, deep yellow head and neck with almost black stripes and markings in sharp contrast.

Approaching stealthily a small, isolated pool a pair of Baldpates is very much surprised to be so rudely disturbed and starts off with exclamations of genuine disgust.

We leave the marsh and as we near the farm a fine old Marsh Hawk, with azure on his back and a ray of sunset scattered over the breast, is started from a fence post. Traversing a patch of high weeds we are greeted on all sides by farewells of a restless throng of Tree Sparrows, assembled here to fix the day or rather the night for the approaching departure. With the exception of the Red-wings all birds, which we have met to-day, are only transient guests, and another week or two will carry off the last of them to the northward. The scene will then be changed and will be very different from what we saw to-day, since other forms of life will take the places of the departed ones.



## ON THE NESTING OF KRIDER'S HAWK (*BUTEO BOREALIS KRIDERI*) IN MINNESOTA.

BY P. B. PEABODY.

THE following notes are based upon three years' observations in a region quite unfavorable to the Red-tails (*Buteo borealis* group), wherein, nevertheless, though I have never seen a *borealis* proper, I have found *krideri* fairly abundant.

The center of this region lies in Steele County, some sixty miles north of the Iowa line. Northward it extends into Rice County, explored, partially, for fifteen miles. To the westward it extends sixty miles into Nicollet County through a well-wooded region, and is practically unexplored. To the east and south of the central point is no timber for miles at all suitable to Buteonine needs.

All this region was originally covered with heavy timber, even far back from the water courses; but the primeval trees are now confined to very small and isolated patches, or to a very few